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courage is contagious

Viewing cable 08ALGIERS787, THE HARRAGA: GIVE ME DIGNITY OR GIVE ME DEATH

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- The top box shows each cables unique reference number, when and by whom it originally was sent, and what its initial classification was.
- The middle box contains the header information that is associated with the cable. It includes information about the receiver(s) as well as a general subject.
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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
08ALGIERS787	2008-07-13 07:11	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Algiers

Appears in these articles:

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VZCZCXRO5652
PP RUEHTRO
DE RUEHAS #0787/01 1950711
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 130711Z JUL 08
FM AMEMBASSY ALGIERS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6104
INFO RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 2804
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID 8993
RUEHRB/AMEMBASSY RABAT 2434
RUEHTU/AMEMBASSY TUNIS 7289
RUEHTRO/AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI
RUEHNM/AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT 6454
RUEHBP/AMEMBASSY NIAMEY 1672
RUEHCL/AMCONSUL CASABLANCA 3487
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ALGIERS 000787

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/13/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [SOCI](#) [AG](#)
SUBJECT: THE HARRAGA: GIVE ME DIGNITY OR GIVE ME DEATH

REF: 07 ALGIERS 1704

Classified By: CDA, a.i. Thomas F. Daughton; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (U) SUMMARY: On the desolate beach of Sidi Salem, in the eastern suburbs of Annaba, a dozen young Algerian males alternate between kicking a soccer ball and working on several small, unmarked wooden boats. Each week, several boats leave from this beach, filled with a cross-section of frustrated young Algeria -- doctors, lawyers, dropouts, the unemployed. They set out across the open sea, usually 10 or 12 to a boat, armed with water, food, blankets, a small motor and GPS tracking device, headed for the Italian islands of Lampedusa, Sicily or Sardinia. They are the harraga -- literally, "one who burns" identity papers and vital documents before departure -- and over 90 percent of them will either die at sea, be arrested and detained indefinitely in Tunisia or Libya, or be returned by the Algerian, French,

Spanish or Italian coast guards. Across the street from Sidi Salem beach is a police precinct, whose officers idly watch departure preparations knowing that they may be asked to arrest these same harraga upon their return. The issue has paralyzed the Algerian government, which vacillates between criminalizing the activity by arresting returning harraga and a more conciliatory approach by offering token financial incentives tied to political support for President Abdelaziz Bouteflika. Anything to make a highly unpopular and emotional issue go away. But the problem is growing, and hundreds of departures from Algeria's eastern and western beaches each month no longer carry exclusively the poor, under-educated, young male stereotype. The harraga have become a fixture in the Algerian media, popular music and daily conversation, a symptom of a society in which entertainment is limited, the education system does not link to the job market, and the doors of opportunity are closed but to the well connected. END SUMMARY.

Should i stay or should i go

12. (U) Now that universities are out of session and the summer season has arrived, newspaper reports throughout the month of June were rife with stories about scores of dead or arrested harraga. The June 15 edition of the French-language daily Tout Sur l'Algerie featured 24 harraga who departed from Oran and were promptly arrested by Algerian authorities upon their return. The front page of the June 18 edition of the French-language daily Le Jeune Independant told of a larger boatload of some 150 clandestine immigrants en route from Libya to Italy that was wrecked at sea, with over 40 dead. Of these, according to quoted survivors, at least 17 were Algerian. Although statistics are hard to verify, the article cited Spanish and Italian authorities who stated that roughly 16,500 clandestines attempted to arrive in Italy from Algeria and Libya in 2007, with another 31,000 departures from western Algeria bound for the Spanish coast. Last November 11 the French-language daily El Watan corroborated those figures, counting 12,753 migrants arriving in Sicily during the first nine months of 2007, a 20-percent increase over the previous year.

13. (U) During our April visit to the beach at Sidi Salem, police officers standing in front of their precinct watched harraga prepare for departure. "We are not the border police," they told us, saying they would not interfere. A look around revealed a soccer field littered with trash, a trash heap and a mosque alongside public low- to middle-income housing projects. xxxxxxxxxxxx pointed down the street from the police station at two small, dingy cafes. Those cafes, he told us, are where harraga gather to exchange information, meet with departure organizers, and pay their way. xxxxxxxxxxxx said that would-be harraga from all over Algeria know by word of mouth to come to the cafes, where an "oral bulletin board" exists of young men pooling resources, organizing departures and coordinating basic supplies. He said that as much as USD 500 is generally required to start the process. xxxxxxxxxxxxis all too familiar with these details: on the night of April 17, 2007, his son xxxxxxxxxxxx left and was never heard from again. The next morning, a friend of xxxxxxxxxxxx visited and dropped off his car keys, telling xxxxxxxxxxxx that his son had left in a boat with nine other passengers, ranging in age from 21 to 39. xxxxxxxxxxxx, the manager of the

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xxxxxxxxxxxx, and a university graduate with computer skills.

Caught between hogra and hargha

14. (U) On the western outskirts of Annaba lies the smaller and more secluded beach of La Caroube. xxxxxxxxxxxx sat idly with three friends on a concrete stoop, while several old wooden fishing boats lay overturned on the sand nearby. xxxxxxxxxxxx told us that last summer he set out in a boat of 10 people, leaving Algerian territorial waters, which he was quick to point out already represented a victory for him. He and his shipmates followed the coastline to Tunisia and prepared to cross to Sicily. The sea turned rough and they were forced to turn back, at which point they were stopped by the Algerian coast guard inside Algerian waters and sent back. xxxxxxxxxxxx boat contained a mixed profile of passengers old and young, including five university graduates and two doctors. xxxxxxxxxxxx said most of his fellow harraga bring GPS devices and do extensive research on weather conditions and mapping the best routes. All of xxxxxxxxxxxx three friends said they had also tried at least once to leave their country by sea, a crossing they say can take anywhere from 12-48 hours

depending on the weather.

15. (U) Kamel Daoud, a retired attorney, is the president of the Human Rights Information and Documentation Center (CCDH) in Annaba, a legally recognized NGO that serves as an informal gathering place for local groups that have been unable to obtain legal status. He is also a member of the Algerian League for the Defense of Human Rights. One of the unrecognized groups that meets at Daoud's center is the Parents of Disappeared Harraga, an association of parents from eastern Algeria who have been seeking assistance and information from the government since the beginning of 2007. Alongside xxxxxxxxxxxx, the organization is run by Boubakr Sabouni, whose son Faycel, age 25, disappeared on May 24, 2007, when he left with six others in a small boat for Italy. One survivor, 30-year-old Riad Haddef, was found alive by the Tunisian coast guard on May 29 but died the following day. His body was repatriated to Algeria, and according to Sabouni, Tunisian authorities also found a small outboard motor and three cell phones. According to Daoud, most harraga bring GPS tracking devices, but believe the crossing is deceptively easy because many of their parents and parents' friends were a part of the region's once-vibrant fishing industry. Sabouni and Belabed asserted that harraga "always call home" upon arrival, without exception, meaning no news is never good news -- either arrest or death.

16. (U) Loitering xxxxxxxxxxxx quickly listed the three reasons Algerian youth want to burn (harga) their documents and leave: hogra (humiliation), poverty and corruption. He and his friends told us of police brutality and "profiling," whereby police harass and often brutalize groups of idle young men who are simply minding their own business. "We have no space to just hang out," xxxxxxxxxxxx said, "since everywhere we go the doors are closed, even on the street or in the park." Daoud explained that because Algeria still lives under the 1992 state of emergency, the government remains paranoid about freedom of association and the spectre of criminal or terrorist activity carried out by young males. xxxxxxxxxxxx could not remember a single case of a female harraga, although xxxxxxxxxxxx on the beach said he had heard of such a case "once." In a conversation with xxxxxxxxxxxx xxxxxxxxxxxx, all three told us that Algerian parents who fought to liberate the country from the French were now "disillusioned" as a police force they helped build "to protect the future of the country" was now antagonizing the next generation.

17. (U) xxxxxxxxxxxx, a young attorney working with xxxxxxxxxxxx, told us the visa process to Europe and specifically France was another source of hogra for young Algerians. xxxxxxxxxxxx said he had applied several times for a visa, xxxxxxxxxxxx only to be "systematically refused" by the French embassy in Algiers. xxxxxxxxxxxx described the visa process as "cold," one in which applicants often spend hours waiting only to see an adjudication official very briefly. xxxxxxxxxxxx said he found an open door through the U.S. International Visitor Program, through which he gained international contacts, additional

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perspective and hope, all of which he was now trying to share with xxxxxxxxxxxx and young legal students in Annaba. Meanwhile, not even the most successful families are immune to the harraga phenomenon: the grandson of former President Chadli Bendjedid, 29 year-old Mourad Bendjedid, left on February 8, 2007 along with six other young men and has not been heard from since.

A government out of touch

18. (C) Political xxxxxxxxxxxx told us on July 8 that the government simply does not know what to do about the harraga, as evidenced by its wildly varied responses. xxxxxxxxxxxx echoed this sentiment to us on June 30, saying the government was "well aware" of the public passions that have been aroused by the harraga, and that the issue had completely stymied the regime. Minister of National Solidarity Djamel Ould Abbes, in a highly publicized April visit to the coastal towns of Ain Temouchent and Tiaret in western Algeria, gathered returned harraga in front of the press and offered 400,000 dinar (approx USD 615) to each, along with an offer to provide work. Ould Abbes' visit came within a week after ten harraga died at sea, with bodies washing up on the beaches nearby. Abbassa said that event further inflamed public emotion and the government became nervous, realizing it had to do something, but "had no idea what that something was."

19. (C) xxxxxxxxxxxx on the beach of La Caroube, told us that Ould

Abbes' offer was "an insult," since at the end of the meeting he asked all those assembled to sign a statement of support for President Bouteflika. Daoud confirmed this and said that the harraga did not sign. Instead, he said, they rallied and encircled the house Ould Abbes was staying in, intending perhaps to take him hostage. Daoud said that when the minister got wind of this, he left Tiaret before dawn, earlier than expected, and rushed back to Algiers. "We do not want someone to throw money at us," xxxxxxxxxxxx said, "we want opportunity." xxxxxxxxxxxx then said he would "sweep this beach" if someone gave him a broom and a modest salary. Instead, he and his friends agreed that the best thing to do with Ould Abbes' 400,000 dinar was "to buy a better boat."

Too little information

10. (C) The parents of the disappeared harraga spend their days lobbying the government to take greater action in obtaining and sharing information. Between April and December 2007, they sent full dossiers on the disappeared and requests for meetings and information to over 37 Algerian government officials, ministries, ambassadors, parliamentarians and judges. They did not obtain a single response. Consultants xxxxxxxxxxxx and xxxxxxxxxxxx were not surprised by this, saying the government would not respond because, although it realizes the emotional urgency of the problem, it had "no clue" how to solve the problem and therefore did not want to touch it. Daoud said that when harraga do not phone home upon arrival, they are most often either dead or in a Tunisian jail. xxxxxxxxxxxx and xxxxxxxxxxxx have sought government assistance in getting information from Tunisia, but xxxxxxxxxxxx said, "nobody is asking on our behalf." Meanwhile, Daoud said that very little effort is made to identify the bodies of harraga that wash up on the beaches of Algeria, and that to his knowledge no DNA testing is done by the Algerian authorities.

Relief and surrender at the mosque

11. (C) According to Daoud, xxxxxxxxxxxx and xxxxxxxxxxxx local parents are "relieved" when their naturally aggressive, entrepreneurial children surrender and begin hanging out at the mosque. "As long as their behavior stays positive and the government controls extremist messaging," Daoud explained, this is a far less worrisome outcome than the risks of the harraga experience. The problem, xxxxxxxxxxxx explained, is that this "spirit of surrender and passivity" found among young men who find comfort in the mosque, "is not at all a natural Algerian quality." xxxxxxxxxxxx said the parents do worry about the temptations of extremist thought leading their children astray, but both were emphatic that "Algerians

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are not natural suicide bombers." Daoud, also a sociologist, said that Algerian society is still suffering from "cultural post traumatic stress syndrome" after the violence of the 1990s. This, when added to current pressures of terrorism and socioeconomic stagnation, leaves many "dazed and paralyzed, with their eyes glazed over. Most people simply don't understand what has hit them over the past 15 years."

Searching for ellis island in the mediterranean

12. (C) COMMENT: The harraga phenomenon has grown steadily over the past year, not only in numbers but in the emotional resonance the issue generates among the population. Crowds packed local cinemas early in 2008 to see a new, locally produced film highlighting the crisis, and the tragedy has become the subject of popular songs by Cheb Mami and other singers. The government appears worried but uncertain of how to solve the problem, trying everything from criminalization of those who leave to highly publicized efforts to win over the disenchanted harraga with money and political promises. Kamel Daoud urged us not to confuse the harraga with suicide bombers, as "it is an entirely different mentality." The act of harraga, Daoud explained, "is a cry for liberty exactly like the immigrants who came to Ellis Island." The harraga are a product of a society whose fear of terror and instability has caused it to shut off virtually all outlets for opportunity, dignity and free association, and not just to the stereotypical poor unemployed male. Back on the beach of La Caroube, xxxxxxxxxxxx listed at least six jobs he had applied for over the last year, all of which he said ultimately went to "people with connections." When asked where we could contact him and his friends if we needed to, he smiled and shook his head. "You can come back in ten years," he said, "and we'll be sitting right here."

